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Literacy and the Free Mind

By Marion A. Wright

NO INVITATION which I could have received would have been more welcome than one to meet with the Lanier Society — no auspices more agreeable than these. In an age when highly placed officials have committed the Hitlerian folly of burning books one likes to be reminded that here and there private citizens are united to give us more and more books. You in Tryon and men and women similarly dedicated throughout the country share a common belief that false ideas are not exorcised by burning books but by producing better books, "errors ceasing to be dangerous when it is permitted freely to contradict them."

There is a point about libraries which I have never seen thoroughly or scientifically explored. (I am sure it has been and that many of you here could give me apt citations). The point is that there is causal relation between literacy and good morals or ethics. If there should exist a dearth of literature on the subject, such lack may perhaps be accounted for upon the theory that it would be wasted labor to establish, logically and scientifically, what is so obviously true. All of us seem intuitively to know that there must be light if there is to be sweetness.

Voltaire touched upon it. "Go over the whole history of Christian assassins — and it is long," he said, "and you will see that never have they had in their pockets with their daggers a copy of Cicero or Plato or Virgil."

An old professor of mine kept in his home a string of keys to all of his rooms, each bearing in Greek the location of the lock it fitted. He was chided by a friend who declared that a burglar should not be given such helpful information, whereupon my professor replied, "No one who knows Greek will ever break into a house."

LITERACY VS. PREJUDICE

Perhaps, basically, this is the argument for libraries — they tend, at least, to civilize, to humanize those who use them.

In nothing is this humanizing process more evident than in the allergy which literacy has for prejudice. The first indication that one is becoming literate is to be found in the contrac-

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This article is condensed from an address to the Lanier Society of Tryon, N. C. Mr. Wright, the president of the Southern Regional Council, has been actively concerned with the public library movement. He is past president of the South Carolina Citizens' Library Movement and former chairman of the South Carolina Library Board.

tion and atrophy of his biases or, rather, in the expansion and extension of his interests and sympathies. The thoroughly literate mind is always the open mind. Bigotry will never thrive in a community of cultivated intellects. He who knows something of *all* ages and places will never live wholly under the tyranny of *this* age and *this* place.

My reason for adverting to this important by-product of the library is wrapped up in your reason for inviting me here. Of course, I should like to think that the invitation was extended because of some peculiar excellence of my own, but I am not quite so naive as to lay that flattering unction to my soul. I know that I am here because of my connection with the Southern Regional Council, an organization pledged to attain in the South the ideal of equal opportunity for all citizens of the region. As such, it has taken the Jeffersonian oath of "eternal hostility to every form of tyranny over the minds of men."

PATHS TO FREEDOM

Surely, there should be psychological fusion between us. Yours the long, hard task by which the minds of men are at last set free, ours the immediate undertaking of helping all men to secure the rights which would be theirs as a matter of common decency and of course in a thoroughly enlightened society. It is my firm conviction that if, for the past fifty years, an efficient public library service had been available for all our people in the South, there would be no civil rights problems to plague us this day.

That is, perhaps, an over-statement. Until the millenium is at hand, even in the most literate society, there will be individuals who seek a preferred status and who feel that they advance more rapidly if others are held back. Those who lack any real superiority but who have power seem to be under the compulsion of proving that they are superior. Hence they surround and bolster themselves with all sorts of legal props designed to convert an actual equality or inferiority into an apparent superiority.

What I mean to say is that, if all of us in the South, white and Negro, had had access to books to the same extent as the citizens of Massachusetts or New Hampshire, our *present* civil rights problems would long since have been behind us. The skirmish line would be far advanced. We would be contending over issues so tenuous, subtle and finely spun as now to be beyond our comprehension. We might still have questions of civil rights but they would be defined in new terms. . . .

From dark corners these days one occasionally hears ugly words — happily none in North Carolina — such words as "If the court should decide against segregation, ways and means will be found to evade and circumvent the decision." Without minimizing the difficulties of enforcement — though I think they have been vastly exaggerated — it may be pointed out that one of the tests of the degree to which we are civilized is the extent to which we are obedient to the unenforceable.

OLD AND NEW TERMS

And, speaking of the re-definition of terms, there were the terms "nullification" and "secession" which at least had about them a certain forthright honesty. They have sired the loathsome offspring "evasion" and "circumvention." These terms gain nothing of sanctity because the senti-

ments they reflect may have been uttered by a former member of the United States Supreme Court.

If the issue of segregation in the schools were entirely a political one, we might defer to the Governors of South Carolina and Georgia as being experts in that arcane field. But involved are questions of fair play, good faith, public morals, community ethics. Without one word of disparagement of either of those gentlemen, I see nothing in their careers which gives them authority superior to the rest of us where probity and conscience are concerned. (I hope the Lanier Society will not be confronted with a demand for equal television time.)

ETHICS — PUBLIC AND PRIVATE

Indeed, there is one consideration, entirely divorced from personality, which supports the view that the convictions of politicians — even statesmen, if you prefer — are less trustworthy than those of the average citizen where honor is involved. The politician is the official voice of the State. He speaks the *public* conscience. The individual speaks *his own.* It is one of the lamentable facts of life that public ethics lag behind individual ethics. When — but only after — a million individuals have developed their own ethical perceptions to a certain point do the ethical perceptions of the state they compose move upward to the same point — just as billions of polyps through the centuries contribute each his bit of lime to produce the coral reef which ultimately rings the lagoon.

One illustration immediately springs to mind. Individuals long since gave up the code duello as a means of settling their differences. But the states those same individuals compose have not otherwise than in pious words renounced war as an instrument of their policy. One individual kills another — despicable. The state, through its army, kills ten thousand men — sublime. That is, of course, if it's our state.

Mr. John Foster Dulles is, of course, a thorough gentleman. He would never try to settle his personal differences by threatening to punch some one in the nose. But, following a well-established formula, Secretary of State John Foster Dulles tries to settle the country's differences by threatening to annihilate a hundred thousand Communists. Such is the flesh and blood and death translation of his phrase "massive retaliation."

So when the ideas of evasion or circumvention of a court decision — whether by constitutional amendment, legislative act or the connivance of officials — emerge from the slime in which they are spawned, let us test their right to our acceptance, not by the eminence of their authors, but by our individual standards of what is a right and an honorable course for a state to pursue.

So we are re-defining the term "civil rights."

"SLAVERY" RE-DEFINED

There is another such term — "slavery."

I am sure that if the question were asked anywhere in the country — Do you believe in slavery? — there would be no affirmative answer. The questioner would be told he should have his head examined, as Sam Goldwyn is said to have remarked about anyone who would consult a psychiatrist. But the correct answer may depend upon definition.

What we would be thinking of, of course, is a condition of enforced servitude — a master and servant relationship of the ante-bellum kind. That slavery, of course, has no champions, no defenders.

But in a broader sense, slavery is a lack of privilege to do what free men do. There was the slavery of chains which merely restrained and limited locomotion. There may be the slavery of law and custom which commands: Use the rear seats. Don't sit in that grandstand. Don't go in that waiting room. Don't eat in that restaurant. Don't attend that church. Don't go to that school. Don't use that library.

Why?

Because you are Negro.

That slavery is subtle.

The chains don't show.

But custom and law may be hard masters. Wounds to the spirit may be deeper than mere leg sores produced by shackles.

Slavery is but half abolished, emancipation but half completed, while millions of our fellow citizens are denied the right to use all of the instrumentalities, institutions and facilities of government upon precisely the same terms as every other citizen.

TUMBLING WALLS

Now, of course, I must admit that all of my remarks are almost out of date — almost, but not quite. Things are moving so rapidly in the field of race relations that, in Alice's immortal phrase, we must run very fast just to stand still. What a pleasant task it would be if time permitted, to comment upon the changes we have witnessed — wrongs rectified in the fields of voting, jury service, appointive and elective offices filled, teachers' salaries, transportation, graduate and religious education, service in army and navy units — the list could be indefinitely extended — business, the stage, literature, churches, sports, entertainment and so on. All about us — everywhere — the walls come tumblin' down.

PUBLIC SCHOOLS

There remains one conspicuous exception — the public schools. That issue is on the laps, if not of the gods, at least of Nine Old Men.

Regardless of how that decision may go, there is a parallel which may be helpful in our thinking. For generations boys and girls in this country were separately educated. One of the issues which engrossed our ancestors — this now seems ridiculous — was co-education. Should the two sexes be taught in the same class room? (In an earlier day men and women were required by custom or authority to sit on separate sides of the church, a sort of ecclesiastical segregation by gender.)

But there came a time when women began to work alongside men in every field — factory, mine, office, store, all the occupations and professions. Then people began to think: If these boys and girls are to grow into men and women who will participate as equals in all human affairs, would it not be sensible to have them know each other as children? If the purpose of education is preparation for life, as we are so often assured, is not that preparation deficient if it limits one's knowledge of the participants one is later to meet? Would boys and girls not be better equipped to deal with each other as equals in business or profession if they had received all their education under identical conditions in association with each other?

Well, the answers to those questions were correctly given by those wise parents of ours. Segregation by gender in education came to an end and Betty Co-ed became a pleasing fixture of our campuses. No one would go back to the old system. Least of all would Betty.

The parallel, of course, is obvious. With the ink barely dry upon their diplomas, white and Negro youth will lock step — in the military services or in business, or trade or profession, in life. From graduation on they will live in a non-segregated world and meet as equals. Would they, too, not be better equipped to deal with each other and to serve a common humanity if they had received all their education under identical conditions in association with each other?

The only answer I have heard given is that we may be going too fast. It is the stock answer — the only answer — left to the gradualist. . . .

THE IRON CURTAIN

At Fulton, Missouri, some years ago, Mr. Churchill coined a memorable phrase which has become a part of daily speech — "the iron curtain." It connotes a system or policy by which people in a certain area shut themselves off from ideas from abroad, place an embargo upon thought originating elsewhere, repel all new conceptions unless locally created.

Of course, ideas, like certain plants, have to be cross-fertilized if they are to flourish. There may be in-breeding of thought as of cattle. So a people who reject ideas from abroad rapidly lose capacity to develop their own. Convictions may lose robustness, virility — become anemic — if not compelled to compete upon equal terms with those of others. Hence Jefferson's "a decent regard for the opinions of mankind."

Now, not only in this country but everywhere throughout the world the tide of democracy is at the flood. Artificial distinctions which men reared between themselves are swept away by the combing surge. Caste perishes. The Ghetto crumbles. Little men stand erect in new-found dignity.

Nowhere more than in the South are these changes evident. And in the South nowhere more than in North Carolina. One could ask no higher honor for his state than that it stand at the head of this liberalizing movement.

In the public schools of the South segregation makes, if not its last, certainly its most significant stand. The conscience of the world condemns it. Indeed, when hearts are searched, the consciences of white Southerners are troubled and ill at ease. There is a certain sense of shame in seeing their states officially locked in combat with the world's enlightened forces, opposing their puny strength against world opinion.

AND THE COTTON CURTAIN

For decades a certain type of political leader, now greatly reduced in numbers and thoroughly discredited, has tried to keep intact a kind of — shall we say cotton? — curtain about the South. The natural foe and inevitable conqueror of that kind of leadership is the public library.

When the last tawdry vestiges of that curtain, with all of its Jim Crow embellishments, come down, to the library, to education, to the press, to all forces of enlightenment and to men's attachment to Christian, Judaistic and humane principles will go the honor and the glory.

Part Two

SOUTH AFRICA TODAY

By Emmett J. and Joyce L. Murphy

In 1952 the accelerating frustrations and demands of the Indians and the Africans all over the Union met the stern measures of the Nationalist Party to implement its Apartheid policy and were channeled off into the Defiance of Unjust Laws Campaign. For the first time in South African history a significant effort was made to unite at least two of the three non-white groups in organized resistance to the system of white supremacy. The Campaign, sponsored jointly by the African National Congress and the South African Indian Congress, was a systematic program of non-violent civil disobedience aimed at the abolition of several laws which are considered to be particularly odious and unjust. These are laws which require all African males to carry a bewildering number of passes and which restrict their movement from one area to another considerably, laws which are adversely affecting property owned by Indians and Africans and causing much financial hardship, and a recent law which declares that a person is a Communist, subject to prosecution and punishment, if he advocates a change in the political, social, or economic conditions of South Africa by illegal means. This last, the Suppression of Communism Act, has caught many firmly non-communist people in its net, since the legal means which one can use to advocate change in South Africa are practically nil if one is not white.

The Nationalist Government's big surprise during the Defiance Campaign came near the beginning, when it became apparent that the movement was well organized, thoroughly disciplined, and determinedly non-violent. Frequent attempts by the police to provoke violence even in self-defense were without success. The spirit of the Campaign spread like wildfire among the uneducated masses of urban Africans and began to catch on even in many rural areas. The number of Africans and Indians who voluntarily went to prison for breaking the pass and curfew laws grew from a few hundreds into the thousands. At the peak of the campaign every week that passed saw several hundreds more go peacefully to jail, court, and then to prison, cheerfully singing patriotic and religious songs and holding up a thumb and clinched fist in the resistance salute. The jails of the country filled so rapidly that soon they were booked to capacity. Eventually over 8,000 volunteers went to prison for terms ranging from two weeks to six months and later emerged as tried and true veterans of anti-government activity.

END OF THE CAMPAIGN

About a month before the national elections of April, 1953, the Campaign ground slowly to a halt. Practically all the leaders of both Congresses had

been tried and sentenced to long jail terms. Almost all the sentences were suspended, but the leaders were placed under injunctions forbidding any political activity, attending any meetings of any sort, or otherwise carrying on their troublesome business. Thousands of rank and file volunteers had been brutally flogged with "sjamboks," the traditional Afrikaner whip of major punishment. The Government proclaimed that the Soviet-inspired attempt at revolution had been crushed. Not one of the demands of the Campaign was even listened to.

GROUNDWORK FOR COOPERATION

Parodoxically enough, the Campaign was in part a success. It laid a groundwork for cooperative action by Indians and Africans. In its later stages it was even joined by seven whites, but it is unlikely that this will have any real effect on the growing anti-white feeling of the Indians and Africans. The membership of the African National Congress, which had been under 15,000 in 1951, swelled to well over 100,000 during the Campaign. This is probably the most successful effort in South African history to draw Africans from all over the Union together into a concerted political movement, and, unless the Government bans the Congress, it will be able to build on this large membership in future campaigns.

The Defiance Campaign marked a new era in South African race relations and politics. During it the Nationalists consolidated their power to a point where the opposition United Party has no real hope of regaining its position for at least a decade or two to come. Further, the leadership of the Nationalist Party has become increasingly anti-British, totalitarian, and strong armed. It is led by men who openly sympathized with Hitler even during the second World War when South African forces were fighting on the side of the Allies. It has promised stern measures in the future to increase the supremacy of white over black and to make it impossible for the blacks ever again to offer a threat to Government policy. There is reason to believe also that it will eventually withdraw from the hated British Commonwealth and go it alone in a world which becomes ever more critical of its racist policies.

During the Defiance Campaign, on the other hand, the African National Congress became more leftist in leadership and more anti-white in sentiment. Not a few of its members now say that Africans will be able to seek their rights and their destiny only when the Europeans are completely divested of power in South Africa. Some of the younger leaders assiduously study Marx, Mao-Tse, Stalin, Lenin, and Malenkov and denounce capitalist exploitation in Africa. The older moderate leaders who are active Christian laymen and clergy with ties to the European liberals are being gradually replaced by these younger leaders.

TROUBLE AHEAD

South Africa is headed for serious trouble. For nearly ten years the trend has been away from white-black cooperative attempts to solve the nation's problems. The European liberals who have for so many years acted as South Africa's spokesmen, men like Alan Paton, Keppel-Jones, Quinten Whyte, Jan Hofmeyr, and Leo Marquard, are shunned alike by the majority of Europeans and Non-Europeans. Their teachings are not accept-

able in a land where things grow more and more to be either-or. Many liberals are leaving for Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. Last year the Liberal Party was formed by the last staunch white moderates in the face of a situation which even many of its members know to be moving out of the sphere of moderate solutions and toward violence and extremes.

It is our belief, after living for a year under South Africa's tensions, hates, and fears, that only outside intervention can save South Africa from eventual revolution. Internal forces have developed into a clash of interests that are successfully crushing out the forces that might have made solution possible.

We Americans have a vital stake in Africa's future. As leaders of the free world, we obviously need the friendship, support, and resources of South Africa and *all* her peoples. Can any one of us afford to be indifferent to the fate of these thirteen million people and risk losing Africa as China was lost?

MORE SOUTHERN LIBRARIES SERVE BOTH RACES

Since "The Color Line in Southern Libraries" appeared in the January issue, *New South* has learned of additional public libraries that serve both white and Negro patrons. Some were overlooked in the Southern Regional Council's survey; others have changed their policies since the January article was published.

Richmond, Va., has given full service to Negroes at the main public library since June 1, 1947.

The Charlottesville-Albemarle Public Library in **Charlottesville, Va.,** has recently extended service to Negroes on an unsegregated basis.

The librarian of the Richland County Public Library in **Columbia, S. C.,** writes: "We have a new library building recently opened and we allow unrestricted use of both the circulation department and the reading room by Negroes. We also have a branch for Negroes in one of the Negro sections of the city."

From the **Jackson, Tenn.,** Free Library comes the information that "on January 1st, 1954, this library began issuing regular readers' cards to the Negro patrons of this library. Heretofore, a limited number of faculty members and high school and college students and a few children had withdrawn books by special permission. We could not claim that we give full reference service even now because our seating capacity in the reading room is limited, but it is our intention and practice to give regular service to all patrons of the library within the restrictions of our physical plant and the size of our book collection. All books, magazines and newspapers are available to everyone."

Mrs. H. W. Long recently became the first Negro member of a public library board in South Carolina. She was appointed to the Darlington County Library Board.

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